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Approved For Release 2003/10/01 : CIA-RDP79R00890A001100070033-2

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THE NORTHERN SEA ROUTE

The 3,500 mile Northern Sea Route is primary supply line to economic and military installations in Soviet Arctic. It is also the only exclusively Soviet passage for transferring naval and merchant vessels from Western USSR to Soviet Far East and Chinese ports. Annual Arctic resupply operations compressed in brief (mid-July to mid-September) navigation season. Major geographic limitation to successful season and vessel utilization are Vil'kitskogo and Longa Straits -- never entirely ice-free and often preventing through passage of Route or forcing shipping to winter at Northern ports.

Cargo handled on Northern Sea Route has tripled in last ~~six~~ years, from 384,732 tons in 1953 to 1,161,152 tons in 1958. Major movements out of Northern Sea Route area are Igarka timber, Vorkuta coal and small amounts of ore from Tiksi and Pevek. Timber cargo moves down Siberian rivers for transshipment at Northern ports for the European USSR -- half of the reported movement is exported to non-Bloc countries. Coal movement follows a similar pattern except none is exported. Identified POL products are imported from European USSR, Far East and Lena River. Lack of adequate storage facilities necessitates packaging of large quantities of petroleum

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In addition, Sea Route traffic is supplemented by rail-river shipments (Trans-Siberian railroad and Lena and Yenisei rivers) for coastal distribution. Importance of Lena looms largest as supply route when ice conditions in two Straits areas preclude arrival and departure of merchant vessels. Polar Aviation supply role is for remote islands and mainland locations inadequately supplied during a season.

DECLASSIFIED
NO CHANGE IN CLASS. IF
1. DECLASSIFIED
CLASS. CHANGED TO: TS S C
NEXT REVIEW DATE:
AUTH: NLR 70-2

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Maritime tonnage involved in annual supply was 639,710 tons in 1958.

1st # Ship numbers have ranged from 1954 high of 479 to 1958 low of 361. Growing efficiency of Sea Route operations reflected in 1958 as year of highest tonnage moved with lowest number of ships. In an average year 33-43 Western ships, primarily Norwegian, British and West German registry, are chartered for timber exports from Igarka to non-Bloc ports. Soviet plans to replace these charters with own shipping have never been implemented. *creating*

The Northern Sea Route is of great importance for transfer of naval units to the Pacific fleet. Since 1954 a total of 151 units, including 41 long-range submarines and one half the major units assigned to the Pacific Fleet have been transferred via the Northern Sea Route. 1955 and 1957 seasons were most favorable for naval transits when 46 and 62 units respectively made the crossing. 1958 was the first year that ice conditions are known to have stopped the transfer of any naval units. In 1956 freezing of Longa Straits allowed passage of only 18 naval units; an unknown number returned 2,900 miles to home bases; and 17 units were forced to winter at Kresty Kolymskie and await the 1957 crossing.

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Most maritime transits are forced when ice conditions prevent their return to home port.

The Soviets intend to continue development of the Northern Sea Route as a maritime lane. The importance they attach to it is reflected in the projected assignment of the atomic-powered icebreaker, Lenin, to the Route. The Lenin is the only known Soviet maritime development to date calling for the use of atomic propulsion.

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The Soviets have also modernized their icebreaker fleet through the import of nine icebreakers from Denmark and Holland.

Other Soviet plans for the Northern Sea Route call for an increase in cargo handled by the Sea Route alone of 182 percent by 1965, and the lengthening of the navigation season from 3 to 6 months.

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